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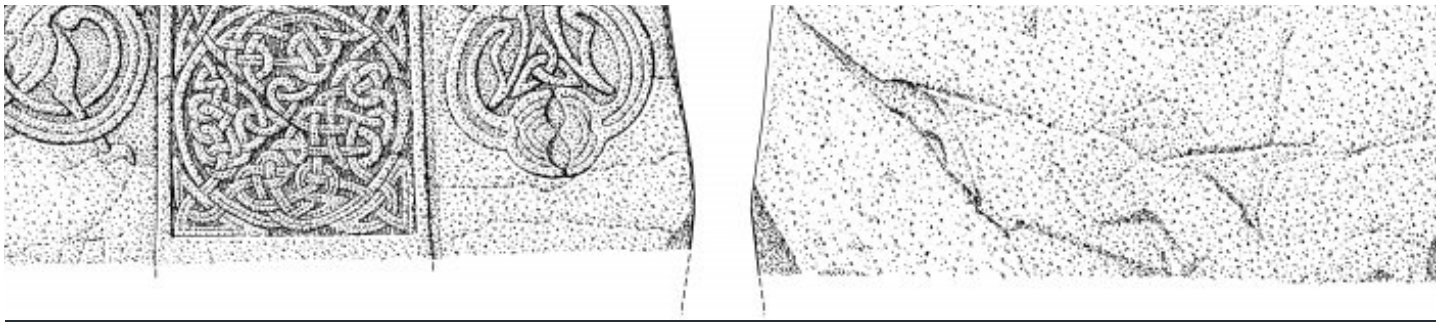
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### Aberlemno Pictish Cross Slab - Aberlemno, Angus





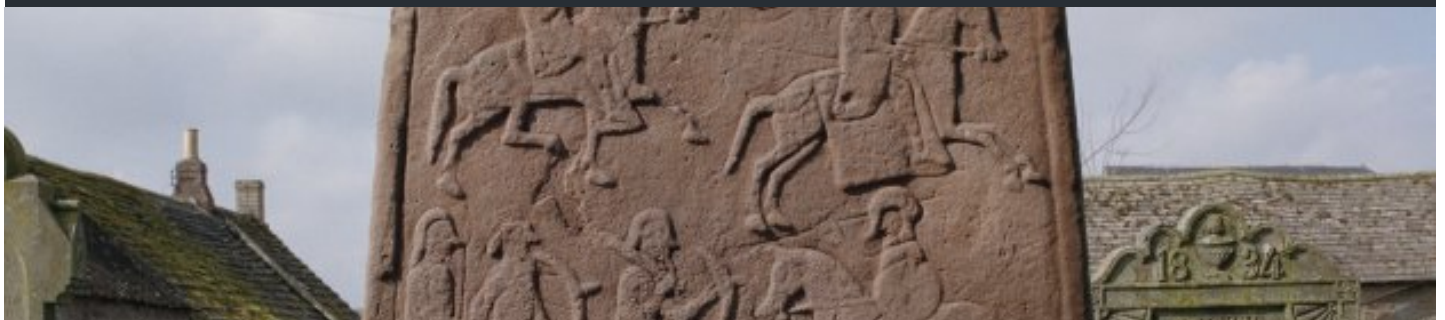
## Aberlemno

The modern village of Aberlemno is set roughly half way between Forfar and Brechin and comprises a couple of farms, a primary school, and a church, as well as the collection of four Pictish stones. Three are set in a row along the B9134, and one in the churchyard. Nos. 1 and 4 are relatively early in date, unshaped slabs bearing decoration usually dated to the 7th century AD (a type known by archaeologists as Class 1). One example, No. 1, also bears six cup-markings on one side, a type of decoration common in Scotland in early prehistory. No. 3 (perhaps in its original location) is a magnificent tall slab bearing a cross flanked by angels on one side, and a narrative panel on the other, perhaps relating the biblical story of David in the lion's den. The combination of Christian and Pictish motifs here is known as Class 2, and suggests a slightly later date, in the 8th century.

Our focus is on Aberlemno No. 2 which has been re-erected in the churchyard (a hole bored through the slab may have been reused in its relocation). It too is a Class 2 Pictish symbol stone with an ornamented cross on one side and the depiction of a battle scene on the other, most recently dated to the middle of the 9th century. It is the work of a highly skilled craftsman who has infilled the cross with intricate knotwork and created a suite of mystical animals, including serpents and hippocamps (a sea-horse). On the reverse of the slab a group of typical Pictish symbols (notched rectangle, Z-rod and triple-disc) is set above three rows of figures which illustrate scenes from a battle.

Following Graeme Cruickshank's 1985 hypothesis, it is still believed to be an illustration of the Battle of Dunnichen (or Nechtansmere) between the Picts and the Northumbrians, which occurred on 20 May 685. Sources describing the battle are few and far between, and we rely entirely on accounts provided by early historians Bede and Nennius, and those in the Irish Annals. The Pictish king Bridei is said to have scored a remarkable victory, trouncing the invading Northumbrian force and killing their king Ecgfrith: 'from that time', Bede wrote, 'the hopes and strength of the English kingdom began to fade away'.

The location of the battle is uncertain although a site near Dunnichen Hill (about 6km south of Aberlemno) has long been favoured. In a recent reassessment of the evidence, historian Alex Woolf favoured Dunachton in Badenoch, an alternative explanation that might throw the interpretation of Aberlemno 2 into some doubt, since it lies on the other side of the Cairngorm mountains some 80km away.





## The Battle Scene

*The opposing combatants are readily identifiable. One side, thought to be the Picts, have long flowing hair while the other, the Northumbrians, wear distinctive helmets with nose guards. The upper row shows a Pictish horseman, sword in hand, pursuing his Northumbrian counterpart whose sword lies dropped behind him. The central scene shows three Pictish warriors with sword, spear and shield repelling an advancing Northumbrian horseman – perhaps a representation of a nodal point in the battle. The lowest row shows two apparently different scenes: in one, two horsemen clash, in the other a bird pecks mercilessly at the body of a dead Northumbrian, perhaps King Ecgfrith himself. Two disks, one at the upper centre, another at the lower right, might represent the sun tracking across the sky during the fateful day.*

*While the stone undoubtedly represents a beautiful expression of Pictish artistic sensibility, we may have much to learn about its true story. With an art-historical attribution to the 9th century AD, its date lies two hundred years after the Battle at Dunnichen; the battle itself must certainly have occurred, but its location is still a matter of debate. To this we might add that the distinctive helmet of the ousted horseman may not turn out to be Northumbrian at all: the analogy draws on the discovery of a remarkable 8th century Anglo Saxon helmet at Coppergate, York, in 1982, and its superficial similarity to that shown on Aberlemno No. 2. Though compelling, it is far from certain.*

*At Aberlemno 2, art, history and archaeology come together to provide a plausible narrative, but one that may undergo significant revision in the coming years as archaeologists uncover more about Scotland's Pictish kingdom.*

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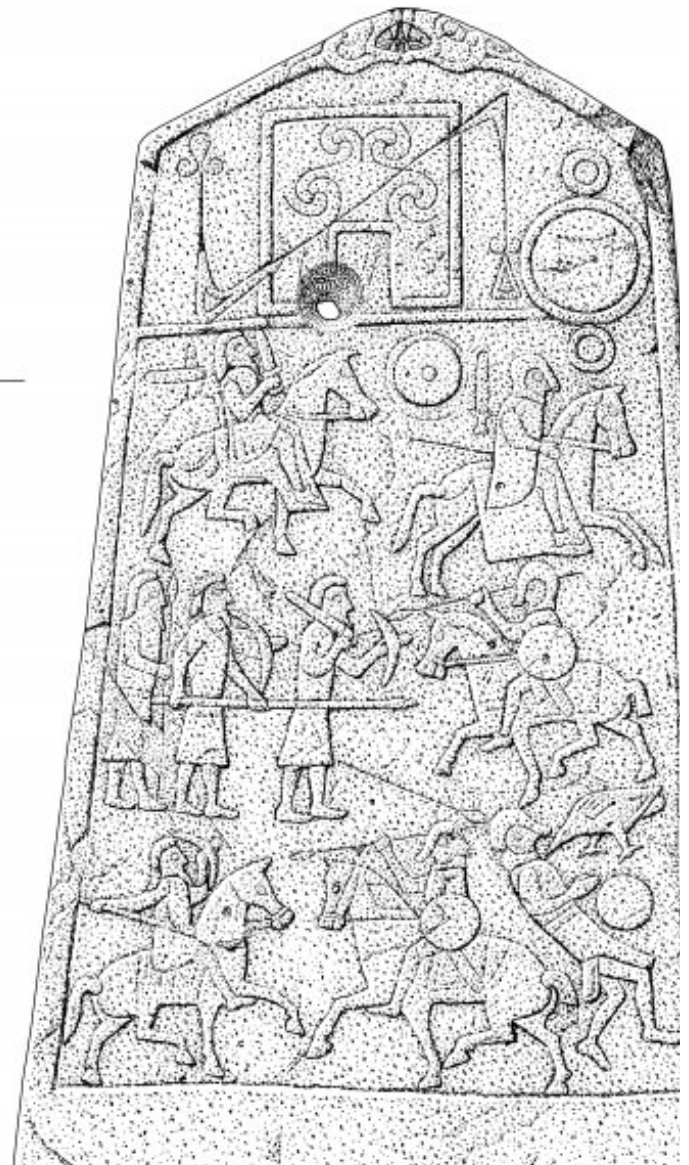




<https://canmore.org.uk/site/34806/aberlemno>

<http://portal.historicenvironment.scot/designation/SM90003>

<https://www.historicenvironment.scot/visit-a-place/places/aberlemno-sculptured-stones/>





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